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ABSTRACT

Contemporary books about Mexican Americans are rare and frequently stereotypical in nature. Until recently, the very few children's books about Mexican Americans were usually written from an outsider's perspective and often displayed negative images and messages about traditional Mexican sex roles, Mexican living conditions, and the Spanish language. Researchers agree that it is important for children to see themselves represented positively and authentically in quality children's literature. Beginning in 1994, a faculty committee at Southwest Texas State University (STSU) developed a new award to honor the best new Mexican American children's books published each year that accurately represent the experience of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Regional and national review committees were established to choose award finalists and the annual winner, respectively. The award was named the Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award in honor of the distinguished Mexican American alumnus of STSU who dedicated his life to improving Mexican American education and who made significant contributions to Mexican American literature. Nomination criteria are listed. Important selection criteria are discussed: enhancing the reader's cultural awareness; avoiding harmful stereotypes; presenting positive representations of Mexican Americans; quality of illustrations; and authentic use of language (English, Spanish, dialect, code switching). The 1995 and 1996 winners and 12 nominees for 1997 are listed. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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Recognizing Writers and Illustrators of Mexican American Children's Literature

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The Need for Literature By and About Mexican Americans

Multiethnic literature reflects the contributions, lifestyles, and values of different ethnic groups. Literature depicting particular ethnic groups helps children from these groups have a better understanding of who they are and what contributions they can make to their country. Multiethnic literature also benefits members of other backgrounds by helping them appreciate and understand America's various racial and ethnic groups. One form of multiethnic literature that is of particular concern in this article depicts the Mexican American culture of the Southwestern United States.

The number of excellent books reflecting the culture, heritage, and contemporary experiences of America's minority populations is very small. Bishop, in Kaleidoscope, estimates that of the fifteen to eighteen thousand new children's books published during the years 1990-92, only 3 to 4 percent relate to people of color (Bishop, 1994, p. xiii). Within this small percentage, the number representing Hispanic culture is even smaller. In addition, until recently, children's books in this category actually represented a conglomerate of cultures from Central and South America (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, the United States, and other Spanish speaking countries) that differ substantially from one other. For example, sometimes children's books categorized as Hispanic literature were specifically about the Puerto Rican experience. Often, authors of these children's

books are not Puerto Rican and many of the stories are "pervaded by sexism, racism, and ethnocentric colonialism" (p. 6) (Nieto, 1982).

Contemporary books about Mexican Americans are even more rare and have also been stereotypical in nature (Ramírez & Ramírez, 1994). In fact, until recently, the very few children's books about Mexican Americans tend to be written with the aim of helping white children sympathize and empathize with, as well as tolerate Mexican Americans (Wagoner, 1982). These books approached Mexican American culture from a tourist or outsider's point of view. This difference in an author's perspective, and the intended audience of a book, naturally affect what authors say and how they say it. Mexican American characters in children's literature of this type often display traditional Mexican male-female roles and live in rural or impoverished circumstances. Stereotypical and negative images are not uncommon in these types of books. For example, the book Good Boy, Bad Boy (Etts, 1967), written about Spanish-speaking Americans, contains the message that speaking Spanish interferes with one's ability to become a functioning member of American society.

Researchers agree that it is important for children to see themselves represented positively and authentically in quality children's literature (Harris, Junko, Johnson, & Garza de Cortes, 1993; Purves and Beach, 1972; Sims, 1983). Children are interested in reading books connected in important ways to their own personal

experiences. Books often can send very strong messages to children about who they are and what they can become, as these books affect children's attitudes, beliefs, and achievement.

The Creation of an Award

Although the number of children's books about Mexican Americans is increasing, the actual number is still inadequate to address the needs of children at all levels in our public schools. Mexican American students comprise 36.7% of the total school population in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 1995-96). It is projected that by the year 2020, the Mexican American population will increase to approximately 41% (Bureau of the Census, 1993). Thus, while there is a rising number of Mexican Americans entering schools at all levels, there are too few books entertaining Mexican American cultural values and motifs. For this reason, in the Spring of 1994, several faculty members at Southwest Texas State University (SWT) visited with John Beck, Dean of the School of Education about establishing an annual literary award for Mexican American children's books. The purpose of the award would be to recognize and honor the best new Mexican American children's books published each year that accurately represented the experience of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The faculty believed that such an award would encourage the creation and publication of culturally

authentic and accurate children's books about Mexican Americans and their diverse cultures.

With Dean Beck's support, a steering committee was formed to collaborate in the creation of this new award. Committee membership included representatives from various departments across the SWT campus: Curriculum and Instruction (Reading, Bilingual Education, Educational Administration), and English (Children's Literature and Mexican American Literature). The steering committee clarified issues related to the award and established Regional and National Review Committees. The Regional Committee had the responsibility to determine, from the nominations of relevant books published in a particular year, the finalists for the award. The Regional Committee consists of college and public school educators, community members, and students. The books chosen as finalists by this committee are then forwarded to a National Committee made up of Mexican American academicians and educators, whose charge is to select a winner from among the books nominated by the Regional committee.

The Steering Committee decided to name the award the "Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award" based on the committee's desire to honor Dr. Tomás Rivera, a distinguished Mexican American alumnus of Southwest Texas State University. Dr. Rivera dedicated his life to the improvement of educational

opportunities for Mexican Americans. Moreover, he contributed a significant collection of Mexican American literary works.

The award will be given annually to the author/illustrator of the most outstanding book for children and/or young adults that authentically represents the lives and experiences of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The award-winning book will receive a $3000.00 cash award and a plaque. A seal, to be placed on each award-winning book, was created by Miguel Valenzuela, a former commercial arts student at Southwest Texas State University. The seal depicts a portrait of Tomás Rivera and a symbolic representation of the Aztec sun. The inspiration for the border of the seal came from pre-Columbian designs. The name, Southwest Texas State University, appears on the left-hand border of the seal.

Criteria for Nomination

The Regional Committee established criteria to judge whether a book qualifies for nomination to this award.

1. The portrayal/representation of Mexican Americans should: a) be accurate and engaging, b) avoid stereotypes, c) reflect rich characterization, d) use English, Spanish, and/or caló.
2. The text and illustrations should be of high quality.
3. The book must have been published with the previous calendar year. (ex. the 1996 award winner goes to the most outstanding book published in 1995).

4. The deadline for nominations is February 1. This includes books published from January through December of the previous calendar year.

5. The nominated books may be fiction or non-fiction.

6. The nominated books should be appropriate for children ranging in age from 5-16.

7. If none of the nominated books is considered to meet the listed criteria, no award will be presented for that calendar year.

The Selection Process

The Steering Committee developed an evaluation form to guide and assist the book reviewers on the National and Regional Committees charged with making the selection. Research was conducted to discover what children's literature experts and researchers considered pitfalls to be avoided and, more importantly, desirable qualities in the authentic portrayal of ethnic group experiences in literature. The following important issues emerged from an examination of their writings and will be discussed below: a) enhancing cultural awareness, b) avoiding harmful stereotypes, c) using positive representations of ethnic characters, d) using quality illustrations, and e) using accurate and authentic language.

Enhancing Cultural Awareness. Ideally, the books chosen for this award should enhance the cultural awareness of the reader, not only about the distinctions, but also the commonalties between

Mexican Americans and other cultures (Harris et al, 1993; Nieto, 1982; Reimer, 1992). In addition, the Mexican American experience in the American Southwest reflects a wide diversity of expression. Variations in cultural practices, for example, may emerge among the different regions in the Southwest, as well as, among generations of peoples living there (Harris et al, 1993). The varied experiences of this diverse ethnic group can thus be a rich source of stories. Children's books that depict any of these diverse manifestations will therefore be considered for the award. Mexican American children, like all children, should read about children different from themselves, but who are, nevertheless, Mexican American.

Avoiding Harmful Stereotypes. Avoiding harmful stereotypes emerged as one of the major issues discussed by many researchers of multiethnic children's literature (Harris et al, 1993; Sim, 1983; Hudelson, Fournier, Espinosa, and Bachman, 1994). For example, Gary Soto's book, *Too Many Tamales*, whose main characters are a middle class Mexican American family celebrating Christmas, is a refreshing change from the negative and stereotypical image created by Gary Paulsen in *The Crossing* (1987). In this book, the main character, Manuel, lives in destitute conditions in a Mexican border town, lies and steals, and wishes to leave his own country to live in the United States. The committees' responsibility is to ensure that harmful stereotypes that have pervaded children's books in the past will not be present in the books chosen as award winners.

Presenting Positive Representations of Mexican Americans. In light of the previous concern over stereotypes, positive representation of Mexican Americans will be considered important, for children will delight in reading stories in which the main characters' actions and decisions illuminate their own cultural values (Sims, 1983). The books should therefore contain appealing characters with which Mexican American children can identify. The committee will thus search for literature in which authors create positive representations of Mexican American protagonists, i.e., characters who are active, resourceful, and intelligent about and within their cultural settings.

Quality of Illustrations. Yet another consideration in the selection of books for the award is the quality of illustrations. Other publications, through their illustrations, have succumbed to the stereotypical portrayal of Mexican Americans that is harmful to children's healthy development of self-esteem or accurate conceptions of Mexican Americans in the U.S. Books should contain illustrations that authentically portray Mexican Americans in all their diversity, avoiding "unirace" characters (Reimer, 1992) such as those often found in Basal readers. Selection of a book for this award will therefore take into account the quality of illustrations and the presence/absence of stereotypical or confusing portrayals of characters whose ethnic identity is not clearly represented.

Authentic Use of Language. Another related consideration and the last major issue that emerged from this review concerns the use of language contained in the book. Mexican American children should recognize and identify with the language used by the characters in the books they read (Battle, 1995; Reimer 1992; Sims, 1983). Clearly, not all Mexican Americans speak in the same fashion (Anzaldúa, 1987). Depending on the setting and characters portrayed, the diversity in language use can extend from a variety of dialects of English, to code-switching, to extended use of Spanish (e.g., consider Soto's *Chato's Kitchen* vs. Bertrand's *Sweet Fifteen*). This diversity should eventually come to be reflected in the collection of children's literature about Mexican Americans that portrays characters who speak authentically to the specific cultural setting being depicted. Nominations for books that are written in English, Spanish, or that contain the text in both languages are encouraged, as are books containing the use of dialect or code-switching.

Authors and publishers must also be concerned with the accuracy of the language used in these books. An example of the lack of accuracy occurs in *The Crossing* (1987), by Paulsen, who uses the incorrect term "bandilerros" to mean "banderillas", the colored, barbed sticks used to stick into the bull's neck during a bullfight. Similarly, the main character's name, Manuel, is incorrectly spelled as Mañuel in the text.

Using these guidelines, and placing equal importance on the literary quality of the book, the steering committee, a children's literature expert at SWT, constructed an evaluation form to help guide committee members at both the regional and national levels in their final choices (See Appendix A). As a result of the work of the various committees, the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award became realized.

Award Winning Books

In 1996, the first annual Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award had two recipients for books published in 1995. Author Gary Soto and illustrator Susan Guevara were honored for their book, *Chato's Kitchen*, and author Rudolfo Anaya and illustrator Edward Gonzalez for their book, *The Farolitos of Christmas*. In 1997, Carmen Lomas Garza was the recipient of the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award for her book, *In my Family-En Mi Familia*, which was published in 1996.

Nominations for 1997

Twelve books have been nominated for the 1997 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award that will be presented in September, 1998 at the Southwest Texas State University campus. Nominated books for the 1997 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award are:

Maya's Children: The Story of La Llorona by author Rudolfo Anaya and illustrator Maria Baca;
Snapshots of a Wedding by author Gary Soto and illustrator Stephanie Garcia;
Sip, Slurp, Soup, Soup/Caldo, Caldo, Caldo by Diane Gonzlaes Bertrand and illustrator Alex Prado DeLange;
White Bread Competition by author Jo Ann Yolanda Hernandez;
Leticia's Secret by author Ofelia Dumas Lachtman;
Pillars of Gold and Silver by author Beatriz de la Garza;
Spirits of the High Mesa by author Floyd Martinez;
The Ice Dove and Other Stories by author Diane de Anda;
Call Me Consuelo by author Ofelia Dumas Lachtman;
Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems/Jitomatoes risueños y otros poemas de primavera by author Francisco X. Alarcón and illustrator Maya Gonzalez;
Where Fireflies Dance/Ahí, donde bailan las luciérnagas by author Lucha Corpi and illustrator Mira Reisberg;
Tomás and the Library Lady/Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca by author Pat Mora and illustrator Raul Colón.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the existence of this new award honoring excellent authors and illustrators whose books depict and illuminate the Mexican American experience in the Southwest region of the United

States will encourage the publication of many more in the future. It is hoped that the award continues to bring about greater recognition to the value of this literature for the education of all the children.

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